

to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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Thy Kingdom Come in Rural America

By Henry S. Randolph*



One of the greatest imperatives in church statesmanship today is an enlarged and intensified program for the rural church. Our churches are now facing a rare opportunity to move into every rural community of America with a creative program with which to present the Christian Gospel in its fullness, making it functional as a cohesive force in every area and interest of human life. This new program for the rural church should provide for the development and integration of man personality, decision, and commitment to the Christian way of life, Christian fellowship, Christian education, Christian fellowship and recreation, rural health, home and family life, rural art, literature and dramatics, labor and economics.

It is important to note that we already have the basic elements for this sort of action -- we have the Gospel of our Lord, we have the people, we have the churches, and we have a method of successful work. All we need to do is to assemble these elements in sufficient quantity in each community and then organize and use them effectively to establish the Christian church in every rural community of our nation. The rural people of America await our coming. Listen to their song -- twenty-seven million farm voices, thirty million nonfarm voices, and mingled with these the cry of the majority of the nation's youth and children. It is a great national chorus rising out of hearts with a sense of spiritual poverty and neglect. They sing, "Come, thou saints of God, come swiftly, lift the broken stone and rebuild the church among us; bring Thy Kingdom, Lord." Here is the voice from the field; the seed bed is ready. This is the greatest seed bed in which the Kingdom of God can plant its roots. If the church is to take advantage of its present opportunities in rural America and to do its duty under God and the Great Commission as our Lord as he pointed the attention of his disciples to Pentecost, it must give intelligent, creative, and unrelenting support to this great task.

I shall now call your attention to certain significant lines of rural church strategy in America for the implementation of a sound rural program:

NEW PARISH ORGANIZATION REQUIRED

Many of our churches located in town and country areas were organized dec-

Address by Dr. Randolph, November 29, 1949, to the Rural Church Institute, Ithaca, New York. Dr. Randolph is Director of the Unit of Rural Work, Board of National Missions, Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

ades or even centuries ago, some in the eastern states dating back to the seventeenth century. Undoubtedly most of these churches met the need of their day -- but that day is long past. In all too many instances we are trying to operate our rural churches throughout the nation on a pattern developed during the horse and buggy era. That pattern does not meet the needs of our motorized age.

Good roads and high-powered automobiles have radically altered the pattern of rural social organization. At the time when many of our town and country churches were organized, rural life centered around the small neighborhood church and one-room schoolhouse. Now rural people in most parts of our country do their shopping and their banking in nearby towns and cities. They send their children to consolidated schools. They attend meetings of civic, social, agricultural, patriotic, and fraternal organizations at the county seat or some other sizeable town. The rural community is expanding.

ADEQUATE BUILDINGS AND EQUIPMENT ESSENTIAL

Most of our rural churches were built more than fifty years ago and have changed but little either in structure or location since then. The typical rural church is a one-room building. It usually has more pew space than its attendance at public worship requires (except at funerals), but it makes no provision for a modern program of Christian education nor does it make any concession to the social and community outreach programs of the church. Its location is frequently off center in terms of contemporary community development, and it may be inaccessible from the point of view of transportation and good roads. The time has come for a program of rural church remodeling and rebuilding. Rural America must be rechurched. Such a program for rural church rebuilding should certainly include the manse so that the (young) minister and his wife need not be introduced to their future home as was one minister by a church official. He said, "We have a fine 12-room manse with a path to the rear." Some of the turnover in the ministry of the rural church might be avoided if the manse were designed for efficient and comfortable living and attractive in appearance.

SPECIALIZED TRAINING FOR THE RURAL MINISTRY

It is a well-known fact that the rural church suffers at the point of ministerial tenure. All too frequently the rural church is regarded as a base for a beginning minister. Without any specialized training for rural work, a young minister will accept a small town or country church just to gain sufficient experience to entitle him to the urban church for which he was trained and which will afford him a better salary and more comfortable living arrangements. There must be an end to the practice of regarding the rural church as merely a stepping-stone to the urban church. If rural churches are to be strong, if they are to have a vital effect on their communities, they must be provided with continuous and well-qualified ministerial leadership. This is being done in some places, and it can and must be done on a much broader scale.

The first step is to provide specialized rural training at the seminary level for young men who show an interest in the rural field. These students should be given a thorough understanding of modern rural life and culture, as well as the usual theological and Biblical studies. These theological and Biblical studies in the seminary should be professionalized, that is, they should be taught to students who are going into rural work from the standpoint of their functioning in rural life. This sort of teaching and leadership is now being provided in some few of our seminaries. When the seminaries have once learned how much fun there is in this sort of

proach, they like it and wonder why they were so long in making such a vital discovery.

Outside the seminaries, certain significant movements making a radical difference are well underway. May I mention here only two of these newer types of training.

First, the Roan Ridge experiment at Parkville, Missouri, a 480-acre farm where seminary students and ministers and workers in service are getting a real exposure to rural life through creative participating activity on the soil, its conservation and use, crops, livestock, production and marketing. At the same time there is the same sort of participation in the total life of the community, providing leadership in worship, religious education, social, recreational, and other activities.

Second, the excellent work which is being done at Green Lake to enrich the lives of rural ministers and to sharpen their skills for the rural church task. This splendid work is nationally known as one of the aggressive movements for the improvement of our rural ministry.

Since our seminaries are having a revival in leadership training for rural churchmen, and since many other agencies are helping to make possible such training opportunities as Roan Ridge and Green Lake, there is likelihood that there will be an increasing number of professionally-trained men and women for our country parishes.

It is therefore imperative that rural churches prepare themselves to offer living and working conditions which will attract and hold these young men with specialized training. This the rural churches can do by more careful planning, better stewardship, or in some cases reorganization into larger parishes. They must be prepared to offer their minister a comfortable, modern home with a plot of ground for gardening and subsistence farming; a mileage grant to cover the cost of travel on the field and depreciation of the car; pension provision; a salary comparable to that of the non-rural minister; and above all, a parish which will challenge a young man dedicated to a creative rural ministry.

PLEA FOR CHURCH UNITY

The church should be a cohesive force, giving the people "a consciousness kind," binding them together into a creative working power for community enrichment, and giving inspiration to achieve these objectives. It must further Christian neighborliness in the rural community and must provide the dynamic that makes rural people want to translate beliefs and convictions into daily living and relationships.

The rural church at its best has concerned itself with the total life of the people, recognizing that we are in a stream of changing rural society and that the church must address itself not only to saving the individual's soul but to saving the community -- "better farming, better business, and better living for my neighbor and myself."

Therefore, if town and country churches are to do the work of God in the community, there must be an increasing measure of interdenominational unity throughout rural America. The spiritual welfare of the people must outweigh vested denominational interests. There should be an end to our denominational snatching and grabbing which results in a spiritually-impooverished people.

In every rural community there should be one, and only one, strong, well-

equipped and well-staffed evangelical church of some denomination or an acceptable cooperative church program of which the people are proud and which they have a will to support. Every possible cooperation should be given from every church source to make church unity in rural areas effective.

Shall we now listen to the call of our rural people as their voices are lifted to the church in prayer from all the corners of the nation: "Come bring us the church, build wide the parish boundaries, staking it in the life of our community through services to all the needs of the people. Help us to build and equip the church so that it shall ever be a symbol of the beauty and holiness of God. Give us a ministry specially trained to do what needs to be done among rural people. Help us to give him a favorable home and adequate support for his family. Give us one, united, cooperative church with a will to serve."

When we have heard and answered this call, the Kingdom of God will be at hand in rural America. In this Kingdom of God hear the Song of the Christian Farmer

I live not alone.

I live on the products of our soil --
soil which we have kept holy,
sustaining the yield, year by year.

I live by our common toil
in the town and on the land,
at the desk or between the rows of growing grain.

I eat, drink, dance, sing, and play --
not alone, but with all the people created by God --
white, black, red, and brown --
in a glorious chorus of my fellows.

I worship at a common altar
beneath the cross of Christ,
and through Him meet my God and my fellows
in the Kingdom of my God.

May thy Kingdom come and thy will be done throughout rural America!

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